

Blind ambition

All About Eve: A psycho-drama with a great plot, and chilling lead character | BY LORRAINE MURRAY

All About Eve

(*Ibeueui Modeun Geot*)

MBC, 2000

(20 episodes, available from YA Entertainment, www.yaentertainment.com)

The 20-episode drama *All About Eve* is often recalled as one of the past decade's landmarks in Korean television, and deservedly so. Fine performances, intriguing characterizations, and swift plotting place it far above the pedestrian from its opening scene. Almost immediately, the shockingly unfilial words of a young woman at her father's deathbed (in the vein of, "What did you ever do for me? I hope you do die") promise viewers, in the manner of Bette Davis in the Hollywood movie of the same name: "Fasten your seatbelts; it's going to be a bumpy night!"

When I first started watching Korean dramas, I was amused by many of the titles. (I still am.) Some were cute and clunky artifacts of translation (*We Are Dating Now; Sorry but I Love You*). Others clearly were nods to well-known Western works (*Great Expectations; Terms of Endearment*). Before I saw this drama, I assumed that the name *All About Eve* was "stolen" from Hollywood for its name recognition factor alone, especially after I learned there was no character named Eve in this drama. But how apt the title turns out to be, and how carefully the theme of the snake-in-the-grass is developed, as much in this drama as it was in its namesake film of 1951.

The original *All About Eve* is the story of an aging Broadway star Margo Channing (Bette Davis) who takes in an ardent fan only to discover the fan is an ambitious actress with designs on Margo's stardom, roles, friends and life. On the surface, it appears to be a fairly typical story of insatiable competitiveness in the theatre. There are, however, some significant issues raised in this film beyond Eve Harrington (the ingénue) and her acting ambitions. Rather, it looks at the conflict in the lives of working women: Marriage (or relationships) versus career.

The drama version of this classic film, which was the top-rated

drama in 2000, has certain parallels in the themes, if not in the exact construction of the story. Foremost among the many praiseworthy elements of this drama is the performance of So-yeon Kim as the "Eve Harrington" character, Young-mi. About 17 years of age at the beginning of the drama, Young-mi has been raised by a poor, single father who gave her no love and no start in life. Her mother abandoned her when she was six, leaving her traumatized, lost, and suspicious of anything good in human nature. Young-mi has had to fend for herself her whole life, and her toxic family background has made her about as conniving and cynical as a person can be and still remain (technically) human.

With her father dead in a construction accident, Young-mi sees a chance with the construction company owner, Mr. Jin (Hyun Suk), an avuncular man susceptible to Young-mi's displays of grief. Playing the helpless, grief-stricken orphan, she manipulates him into taking responsibility for her father's death; he, having a daughter the same age, feels sorry for the poor, beautiful young thing. Thinking that it's all his idea, he offers to take her in and help her go to college along with his daughter, Sun-mi (Chae Rim), who, like Young-mi, dreams of becoming a broadcast anchor on the Nine O'Clock News.

Sun-mi is a cute, bright, sunny girl who, despite having lost her mother at an early age like Young-mi, has had an easy life. Showered with love and material comfort, and even having a maternal substitute in the person of family friend Mrs. Song (the versatile Won-sook Park), Sun-mi has just one thing shadowing her young life: Mrs. Song's son, Woo-jin (Jae-suk Han), the boy she's loved all her life, doesn't love her back. To him, Sun-mi will always be just a little sister.

Into this scenario comes Young-mi, who quickly displays a notable talent to fool any man into believing in her pretty façade. Mr. Jin wants to take care of her. Woo-jin falls for her, breaking Sun-mi's heart. As for the women, Mrs. Song thinks she sees through her but reserves judgment, and Sun-mi never has a chance to be an ally to Young-mi because from the word "go," the driven Young-mi is gunning to rip



away from Sun-mi all she holds dear. Sun-mi represents everything that Young-mi has been denied. In her jealousy, the newcomer conceives a hatred for Sun-mi as fierce as though the other girl had personally stolen the life she deserved.

All About Eve is the story of the long rivalry between the two young women. Initially, this rivalry is all on Young-mi's side; naïve Sun-mi can't understand how deep the other girl's hatred goes because such a thing is inexplicable to someone whom life has never taught to be hard. Even the irretrievable loss of Woo-jin's heart — which Sun-mi knows Young-mi gained deliberately through manipulation, in order to hurt her — can't quite teach her to stop expecting anything but the worst from Young-mi.

As the story continues, both major in broadcasting at the same college and go on to work at the same television network, where we meet the true counterpart to Margo Channing in the movie *All About Eve*: Not Sun-mi, but star news anchor Ju-hee Yu (Jung-eun Kim), to whom Young-mi attaches herself as an apprentice/sycophant. She is never so busy, however, that she has to put aside her vendetta against Sun-mi, so she continues to try to ruin things for her through the most despicable means.

What's fascinating about the character is that she is unabashedly two-faced. She curries favor shamelessly and effectively with people who have something to offer her. In this endeavor she employs her beauty and her dainty but copious tears, along with, admittedly, a great deal of natural broadcasting talent and hard work. But with those people she resents or can't use in some way, she barely bothers to hide her ugly side.

Yet this is no cartoonish villainy. So-yeon Kim makes Young-mi a monster, almost a sociopath. Still, there remains a tiny fraction of her heart that is still a little child who doesn't understand why she has to live in this self-destructive misery she compulsively creates. It's that tiny fraction that is the key to Young-mi's fascination. Almost involuntarily, she shows this side to Woo-jin, who remains devoted to her no matter how badly she treats him. In her most vulnerable moments, she even admits the bad things she feels and plans to do, almost as if she wants to be stopped; at these times, it is obvious that no matter how easy it is to hate her, there is something pitiable about her.

Young-mi is, in fact, a great Buddhist-style lesson in the destructive power of craving that is never satisfied; the attainment of the desired object is never enough, because the emptiness inside can never be filled. And, to get a little fanciful, the two women together are like a yin-yang symbol, which depicts the complementarity of opposite forces: One is mostly dark with a bit of light, and the other is light with a touch of dark.

The talented actress Chae Rim, though somewhat overshadowed by her costar's pyrotechnics, gives a very creditable and well-rounded performance. One can see a little of why Young-mi resents her so much; things come so easily to her. She is lucky, and she is blessed with charm. Chae Rim's round face and merry little half-moon eyes express the cheery soul of Sun-mi. But, no mere Kewpie doll, the actress is quite believable when, with Young-mi hard on her heels, Sun-mi toughens up, buckles down, and gives rein to her own competitive spirit.

Still, although the character takes

some very hard knocks, she never loses her warm heart. This kind of role suits Chae Rim well, and she recently played a more mature version of it in the excellent *Dolja's Spring*. (So-yeon Kim, on the other hand, has continued in television dramas but has not had nearly as high a profile since *All About Eve*, and it's not clear why. With that much talent, she should be a bigger star.)

As Hyung-chul Yun, the estranged son of a wealthy broadcasting family whom Sun-mi first meets in London, actor Dong-gun Jang gives a layered performance that deepens over time. At first he is just a young man on the run from his familial burdens; as he matures and faces up to his responsibilities, he becomes a powerful businessman, but the actor doesn't lose sight of the surprisingly nurturing Hyung-chul that we viewers (and Sun-mi) come to know. It is particularly interesting to watch his interplay with Young-mi, which keeps the viewer guessing as to whether she can turn him to her side as easily as she did Woo-jin.

The central conflict of the drama and its resolution unfold surely and evenly, although the plot is punctuated by periodic crises caused by Young-mi's jaw-dropping behavior. There is an air of inevitability to each new development, and whatever occurs seems to make sense because all the action is firmly rooted in character. The denouement is rather unusual in its particulars, but it makes a kind of sense; more importantly, it sheds more light on the main characters in a very moving way.

It has been said that the two leads in *All About Eve* are like two sides of one woman, and that without the other, each would be less than she is. Certainly this is true for Sun-mi, who is spurred to greater achievement by Young-mi's competitiveness, but whether the same can be said for Young-mi is debatable. Still, there is no real need to look for such parallels. *All About Eve* has enough to offer as it is: A pair of juicy female roles (unusual in this time of dramas that mostly portray women as either feisty, comic go-getters or Barbie-doll love objects), a great plot, and a compelling character study that will keep viewers thinking long after the drama ends. ●